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A METHODOLOGY FOR RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF  
SEX IDENTITY IN PHILOSOPHY

The most common response today to the suggestion that sex identity is a central issue in philosophy is the claim that sex identity belongs rather to anthropology, psychology, theology, history or political science. The underlying assumption of this response is that sex identity is not a philosophical issue. In attempting to penetrate more deeply into this attitude one runs up against what could be called a "wall of definition". This wall prohibits anything which can not fit into the category of universal and necessary qualities, or what are better known as "defining characteristics" from passing through into the greener fields of philosophy.

To be more specific, in the area of sex identity, the claim is made that the differences between women and men are not universal and necessary. Modern technology has made it possible to use chemistry to change the hormones and to use surgery to change the anatomy usually associated with male or female identity. In fact, many institutions now use conflicting criteria for determining who is a man or a woman. The governments and law in both the United States and Canada use anatomy as the defining characteristic of sex identity. This allows for a person who had undergone a sex change operation to inherit the legal status of the artificially created sex rather than the naturally inherited sex. In contrast to this practice, however, the International Olympic Committee uses the chromosomal structure of the bodily cells to determine who may take part in women's or men's competitions.

As a consequence of these developments in the technological capacity

to change the body and institutional choices of "so-called" defining characteristics of sex identity, there appears to be no one single universal or necessary characteristic accepted by all persons as a defining characteristic of woman's or man's identity. This had led some philosophers to conclude that all characteristics associated with sex are simply "synthetic" or accidental aspects of personal identity. For example, Alison Jaggar in her well known article in Ethics entitled "On Sex Equality" argued:

There is no reason to believe that sexuality is a category which must be applied to persons so that it becomes necessarily true that we are all either female or male.<sup>1</sup>

It is at this point, when in stumbling upon an interesting contemporary puzzle, that I would like to suggest that a second glance at the history of philosophy may prove to be useful. Today many feminist philosophers appear to be caught by a desire to reject every aspect of a philosopher who may have defended a theory of sex polarity, that is a theory which supports a fundamental superiority of man over woman. Aristotle is a good case to consider. There is no question that this Greek philosopher provided the most thoroughly developed rationale for the inferiority of woman during the first two thousand years of western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> It is also clear that his arguments were based on a faulty biology and that they pervaded his philosophy to the far ranging categories of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and political theory. It is tempting to conclude from this that Aristotle would not be helpful for any contemporary argument in the philosophy of man and woman other than to reinforce the structure of a traditional sex polarity. However, I would like to suggest a way in which

Aristotle might prove to be very useful to some important contemporary concerns. Specifically, I would like to suggest that Aristotle offers a way out of the dilemma considered at the outset of this paper.

The question of whether there are any defining characteristics of sex identity was asked by Aristotle in Book X of the Metaphysics. The philosopher wanted to know whether the differences in male and female were enough to constitute a difference in species. Arguing that the differences between the sexes were not a difference of form, he concluded that: "Male and female, while they are modifications peculiar to 'animal', are so not in virtue of its essence but in the matter, i.e. the body."<sup>3</sup>

While Aristotle argued that differences in sex identity did not constitute "defining" characteristics properly understood as universal and necessary aspects of a specific kind of species identity, he did not conclude that the issue of sex identity is irrelevant to philosophy. In fact Aristotle gave a great deal of attention to the question.

In the Generation of Animals three different criteria were suggested for differentiating men and women:

1. The female always provides the material, the male that which fashions the material into shape; this, in our view, is the specific characteristic of each sex.
2. The female, qua female, is passive and the male qua male, is active -- it is that whence the principle of movement comes.
3. By "male" animal we mean one which generates in another, by "female" one which generates in itself.<sup>4</sup>

Let us briefly examine each of these criteria in order to determine their applicability to contemporary philosophy.

The first criteria is derived from Aristotle's erroneous claim that

only the male provided seed in generation. He argued that this seed contained the non-material formative function in generation, while the female contribution consisted simply in the material aspects of the embryo. Contemporary knowledge of generation, however, indicates that both male and female provide a formative dynamic to generation in their respective chromosomal contributions. At the same time, both sexes also provide a material contribution, through the physical structure of egg and sperm. Therefore, Aristotle's first criteria for "a specific characteristic of each sex" would not be useful today.

The second attempt to differentiate male qua male from female qua female followed directly for Aristotle from the first criteria. He believed that the formative role of the male seed was the activating force of the conception while the material contribution of the female was passive. Contemporary science, however, indicates that the parents play an equally active formative role in conception in the union of egg and sperm, and that this activity may even extend to the complementary "swimming" of the male seed and the "spinning" of the female seed before union occurs. Therefore, the attempt to develop distinguishing characteristics of the two sexes by using the criteria of active and passive contribution to generation is also not applicable today.

The third criteria, at first glance, appears to be more promising. Aristotle's suggestion that maleness "means" generating in another, while femaleness "means" generating in the self, appears to hold true in natural generation among human beings. However, the theoretical and now increasing empirical possibility of "test tube babies" implies that even this criteria could not be taken as universal and necessary because advances in

technology which would allow a female "to generate outside of herself".

How are we to evaluate Aristotle's criteria in the light of contemporary scientific knowledge? We could reject the specifics of his first two criteria, while leaving room for exceptions to the third criteria. In this move to a consideration of the category of "exceptions", it may be useful to consider how Aristotle would have handled exceptions in his own day. Aristotle must have been aware of the fact that some people were born who did not fit exactly into his criteria. There are men and women who are not capable of generating because of defective seed, or even because of abnormal anatomy. These persons, however, are generally classified as infertile men or infertile women; they do not lose their sex identification because they did not fulfill the criteria mentioned above. A single exception would not be enough to throw away the general principles which Aristotle had introduced for distinguishing male from female.

The clue to Aristotle's flexibility in the area of biological differentiation of the sexes can be found in his description of science in the Metaphysics: "All science is of that which is always or for the most part."<sup>5</sup> The inclusion here of the phrase "for the most part" opens the door to descriptions of sex characteristics which are neither universal or necessary. At the same time, however, they do not fall down to the level of accidental or totally unnecessary characteristics. Therefore, for Aristotle the defining characteristics of sex identity would involve the statement that for the most part men have the following characteristics, or for the most part women have the following characteristics. This flexibility gives room for the exceptions flowing from natural abnormalities in Aristotle's time or from technological abnormalities in the contemporary

world.

When we seek to discover why academic philosophy is structured today in such a way as to exclude from consideration anything which is not able to fill the criteria of universal or necessary characteristics, or to be more specific to our subject, to exclude a consideration of differences between women and men because "philosophy ought to consider the species" rather than the "accidents of species", it is necessary to trace the way in which logic became established as the favoured methodological foundation for the academic study of philosophy. Once again the road returns to Aristotle.

The flexibility of Aristotle's description of science in the Metaphysics which allowed its subject to contain that which is "always or for the most part" true, was not found in his logical treatises or in the Organon in which the syllogism was founded upon an absolute distinction between universal A (All x is y) or E (No x is y) propositions or particular I (Some x is y) or O (Some x is not y) propositions.<sup>6</sup> Anything which was not universal automatically fell into the category of the particular. In this way, that "which is for the most part true" was reduced to "that which in at least one instance is true". In this way "ninety-nine out of a hundred" could be collapsed to "one out of a hundred". The significant difference between these two ratios is obvious.

In the history of philosophy it was Aristotle's logic and not his more flexible criteria of the Metaphysics that was integrated into the academic structure of philosophy at the foundation of the University of Paris in the thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The integration of the rigid criteria of a universal science was further reinforced in academic philosophy by the

development of Cartesianism in the seventeenth century. Within this context of preference for universal definitions as required by logic and mathematics, there was no room for a consideration of the definition of sex identity which inevitably contained the exceptions which needed the category allowed by the phrase "for the most part". Therefore, it is possible to understand the difficulties which face the integration of the philosophy of man and woman into academic philosophy.

It is also possible, however, by tracing this historical development of events to demonstrate that during the first two thousand years of western philosophy, that is from approximately the fifth century B.C. to the thirteenth century A.D., that philosophers lived more by the Aristotelian example than by Aristotelian logic. That is, nearly every philosopher during this time considered at least one aspect of the concept of woman in relation to man, and many philosophers considered several aspects of this issue. Then, after Aristotle's writings became required reading at the University of Paris in 1255, and after the curriculum at Paris became the model for curriculum at other universities developing across Europe, a major shift began to occur in the history of the philosophy of sex identity. As Aristotelian logic was used more and more as a model for philosophical method, discussions of human identity focused more and more on the species "man" than on the differentiation of sex within the species. The later explosion of the Cartesian method in philosophy simply reinforced this trend.

If we view the history of philosophy of sex identity as falling into these two historical phases, that is, the first phase from approximately 500 B.C. to 1250 A.D. with its openness to the flexibility demanded by consideration of sex identity, and a second phase from approximately 1250

A.D. to the nineteenth century with its rejection of flexibility in differentiation through a preference for a method based on logic and mathematics, it would appear that the drive today to reintroduce the philosophy of woman and man into academic philosophy reaches back to its historical roots in the first phase of western philosophy. Therefore, by a study of these phases in the history of philosophy it is possible to uncover the Archimedean point which will move academic philosophy once again towards the serious consideration of sex identity as a philosophical issue.

If we step back a little from the specific example given above, to a consideration of the methodological issues involved, it is easy to see that the particular method I am suggesting operates in the following way. First of all, a significant contemporary issue in the philosophy of man and woman needs to be posited and clarified as to the question it poses for contemporary study. Then, just as in so many other fields of philosophy, a careful search should be done to discover what sorts of arguments previously suggested by philosophers are relevant to the issue at hand. This means that some of the arguments will probably be sound and others unsound. By sorting through this inheritance from the great minds of men and women of the past, it is then possible to move forward by building upon the rich philosophical foundations which are our own. It is important to firmly establish the philosophy of man and woman upon a solid historical foundation and to resist the temptation to set forth in a vacuum. A considerable amount of careful thought has to been given to many different questions in this field of study in the past. Even though much in these historical arguments was incorrect, the patterns of arguments and theories



themselves are often useful for contemporary research.

After we have sorted out what is useful in the ancient texts, it is possible to move forward directly into a contemporary argument about the issue under consideration. For example, we could say that what is needed today in contemporary academic philosophy is some way to achieve flexibility in definitions which allow for the technological exceptions to occur without completely destroying the claim that there are distinctions between women and men which "are for the most part" true. What is needed is some third alternative between universal and necessary characteristics, on the one hand, and particular or accidental characteristics, on the other hand.

It might be possible to consider something such as a "cluster-concept" proposed by Michael Scriven in the "Logic of Criteria".<sup>8</sup> In this article Scriven considered the example of a lemon. One could describe this fruit as coming from a particular kind of tree, having a particular range of size, texture, color and taste. If a fruit was produced that had one of these characteristics missing it might be described as a "pink lemon" or a "large lemon". etc. However, if too many of the characteristics did not apply, then the person might conclude that a different kind of fruit had been produced, perhaps as a hybrid.

If we apply this method of classification to the question at hand, it might be possible to establish criteria for woman or for man that contained a specified "cluster-concept". One task of contemporary philosophy could be to consider just what these characteristics might be. They could include reference to chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, psychological identification, socialization and inherited past present in a given culture.<sup>9</sup> This cluster-concept would allow for an exception to occur, without throwing

out the theory that there are philosophically significant differences between the sexes. The exceptions would be natural, sociological or technological. The key here is the fact that if too many of the characteristics are missing, then the classification may have to change. However, one characteristic could be missing without such a change being necessitated.

Once again the limitations of logic must be recognized when it comes to a consideration of woman's or man's identity. For example, if a person lists a few criteria for sex identity in a logical conjunction, where "and" is represented by the sign " $\wedge$ ", the conjunction would read as follows: a man has the following characteristics: AABACADAEAF; or a woman has the following characteristics: GAHAIAJAKAL. These conjunctions would imply that all the characteristics must be present in order for the classification to hold. The conjunction then rules out the situation of the exception. At the same time a disjunction has the opposite problem. If "or" is represented by the sign " $\vee$ ", a man would be described as having the following characteristics: AVBVCVDVEVF and a woman as GVHVIVJVKVL. In this case, since only one characteristic would need to be present for the disjunction to hold, the logical structures for disjunctions create too weak a criteria. Therefore, either a new logic must be created which develops a third category corresponding to Aristotle's ancient "for the most part true" and which would explain the presence of approximately five or six out of seven criteria needed to be true in order for the logical operation to be valid, or the notion of using logic for such a "cluster-complex" must be dropped.

It might also be asked whether or not an adaption of Michael

Scriven's notion of a "cluster-concept" leads to the inevitable conclusion that a specified set of characteristics could be arbitrarily established by a particular group of people as a "language game". The implication of this suggestion is that once again there would be no factual basis in the world for making such distinctions between women and men. I would answer this question in the following way. While it certainly is possible to set up arbitrary criteria for sex differentiation, much as new logics have been invented and developed, it seems to me to be much more productive to focus on existential criteria, that is, to consider actually existing differences between women and men in the world.

Two difference conclusions follow from this decision. First of all it is clear that the Olympic Committee or the law were not arbitrary in their selection of chromosomes or the anatomy as the "defining" characteristics of men or women. However, from the broader philosophical perspective it would need to be said that their respective choices were limited to a specific purpose consistent with their institutional goals. Philosophy, however, ought to provide a broader perspective by considering all the relevant criteria and joining these criteria in a cluster-concept.

A second philosophical problem worth considering is whether an existential description of the cluster of criteria of woman or man limits one to the status quo. This problem would be particularly evident in a consideration of the element of socialization in sex identity. I would agree that this is not a necessary consequence, for the existential approach simply reveals the starting point. With human freedom and initiative it is possible to move into entirely new ranges of activities and characteristics. However, the starting point ought to be recognized in a specified way.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to point out that philosophers need to seek out scholars from other disciplines in attempting to establish criteria for sex identity. The fields of medicine, psychology, sociology, history, linguistics and economics come immediately to mind. The philosophers' role can concentrate on the goal of synthesizing criteria from different disciplines into a cohesive "cluster-concept". It is also obvious that different philosophers will reach a wide variety of decisions about the relevance of various criteria, or even about the desirability of focusing on sexual distinction within other broader philosophical concerns. In any event, once it is firmly established that such a subject is of philosophical interest and that its proper place of consideration is in the heart of academic philosophy, then the hard work of developing and defending a specific theory can begin.

In conclusion, then, I would like to say that this advent or second coming of philosophy of man and woman in the heart of the academic institution is a welcome event. It is precisely this activity of movement back and forth from contemporary to historical thought, a movement of fertility between the old and the new that will bring forth new life within the field of philosophy itself.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Alison Jaggar, "One Sexual Equality", Ethics, Vol. 84, No. 4, July 1974, p. 278.
2. For a thorough discussion of this issue see Sr. Prudence Allen, R.S.M., The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution (750 B.C. to 1250 A.D.). (Montreal and London: Eden Press, 1985).
3. Aristotle, Metaphysics in The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941), 1058, 29-31.
4. Aristotle, The Generation of Animals (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1943), 739, 20-25; 729, 15-20; and 716<sup>a</sup>, 9-19.
5. Aristotle, Metaphysics, op. cit., 1065<sup>a</sup>, 2-6.
6. Aristotle, Topics in The Basic Works of Aristotle, op. cit., 102<sup>b</sup>, 3-6.
7. The University of Paris served as a model in its curriculum and structure for most of the other universities of Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For a thorough discussion of the integration of Aristotle into these academic institutions see Allen, The Concept of Woman, op. cit., Chapter V.
8. Michael Scriven, "The Logic of Criteria" in The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. LVI, (1959), pp. 859-868.
9. For a more detailed consideration of this subject see Christine Allen, "Sex Unity, Polarity, or Complementarity?", International Journal of Women's Studies, September/October 1983, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 311-326.
10. I would like to thank the participants in the Society for Women in Philosophy Annual Conference, November 1984 in Montreal, for helping me to clarify many of the points in this paper.